

# How To

# Talk To Your Doctor

(and get your doctor to talk to you!)



Houston Center for Quality of Care & Utilization Studies



National Institutes of Health



Office of Research on Minority Health



"How to Talk to Your Doctor" is an educational workshop. The information is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. The information made available through this training is intended to help you develop knowledge and skills that can help you make informed choices. This booklet does not constitute a contract, express or implied, between any participant and Baylor College of Medicine.

June 2002

# **How To Talk** *To Your Doctor*

**(and get your doctor to talk to you!)**

**An educational workshop on  
doctor-patient communication**



Excellence Centers to Eliminate  
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# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

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**T**hank you for attending the “How to talk to your doctor” workshop. In this workshop, some of the best tips for improving communication with your physician will be discussed by your workshop leaders.

The trainers will talk about “building bridges” between you and your doctor by understanding the doctor’s role and his/her duty to you. In particular, your doctor should communicate important health information to you in a clear and understandable manner. Your actions matter too. You can make a difference through what you say and how you say it.

This workshop will help you: 1) recognize barriers to good doctor-patient communication, 2) learn good patient communication techniques, and 3) practice your new skills with our workshop trainers. Throughout the workshop, the trainers will invite you to share your input and experience.

If you have any questions during the workshop, please ask the trainer or workshop coordinator. If you know of a community group that would be interested in our “How to talk with your doctor” workshop, please contact Darrell Zeno, IDEAL Core Program Coordinator, at 713-794-8601. He will be happy to assist you.

Thanks for joining us. We hope that you will participate, learn, and enjoy today’s workshop!

Sincerely,



Frank Martin, MS  
Director, IDEAL Core

# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

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## Practical Goal *Objectives*

### **Goal: Use doctor-patient communication strategically to improve health**

At the conclusion of the session, participants should be able to:

1. Recognize barriers to good doctor-patient communication.
2. Describe expectations for good doctor-patient communication.
3. Recognize examples of good doctor and patient communication traits.
4. Apply 3 tips for improving doctor-patient communication.
5. Demonstrate good doctor-patient communication techniques.
6. Recall good doctor-patient communication strategies.

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## Why is doctor-patient communication important?

- Doctor-patient communication may play a role in health disparities
- The facts: communication patterns are related to health outcomes, patient satisfaction, and ability to recall recommendations
- Doctor visits are short, about 15-20 minutes
- Talking to your doctor is the most important way of figuring out the problem

*Your actions can make a difference!*





# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

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## Step

## #1

### **Recognize barriers to good doctor-patient communication**

**A**nyone can face barriers to good communication. Barriers restrict or limit communication. Barriers can get in the way of understanding your doctor or a barrier can affect the quality of care you receive. On the video, what barriers does the patient face? Can you think of other barriers that you, a friend, or family member have faced?

#### **Common barriers**

- Language or cultural differences
- Limited access to care or perception of low quality
- Control of the conversation, aggressive doctors, medical jargon
- Stereotypes about cultural groups: e.g., African Americans, Asians, or Hispanics
- Time limits or excessive waiting times
- Confidentiality
- Provider seems to lack concern or to have a profit motive
- Age, gender, dress and grooming
- Physical access



# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

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## Step

## #2

### Recognize examples of good doctor and patient communication styles

**L**et's look at doctor-patient communication more closely. What communication skills should you expect from your doctor? You be the judge! Put a check mark next to the traits that you think a doctor should display during your visit.

Your doctor should...	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Introduce himself/herself
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ask you to describe your problem
<input type="checkbox"/>	Know the latest medical advances
<input type="checkbox"/>	Give information on your condition and tests
<input type="checkbox"/>	Provide diagnosis about your disease and illness
<input type="checkbox"/>	Give instructions for treating your condition
<input type="checkbox"/>	Explain things in a manner you can understand
<input type="checkbox"/>	Take time to answer questions
<input type="checkbox"/>	Listen to you
<input type="checkbox"/>	Show his/her understanding of your situation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Express himself or herself
<input type="checkbox"/>	Maintain confidentiality about information you provide
<input type="checkbox"/>	Offer language translation or assistance service
<input type="checkbox"/>	Return your phone calls in a reasonable amount of time
<input type="checkbox"/>	Display positive feelings toward patient and family
<input type="checkbox"/>	Encourage you to participate

# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

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## Step

## #2

### Recognize examples of good doctor and patient communication styles

**N**ow let's consider good patient styles. Describe what a patient should do to improve communication with their doctor. Put a check mark by the communication tips that you think a good patient should display during a doctor's visit.

As a good patient communicator, you should...	
	Be prepared!
	Write down any questions or make a list of your concerns.
	Try to be as specific as possible about your symptoms.
	Say when your symptoms started, how often it occurs, and if it is getting better or worse.
	Ask questions about anything that you are uncertain about.
	Know your medical history.
	Give your explanations for illness.
	Inform the doctor about any personal beliefs or practices (cultural or religious, spiritual) that may affect a treatment.
	Make sure you understand your doctors recommendations.
	Share information about what is going on in your life that may be useful to the doctor.
	Request language translation service in advance, if possible.
	Express your health concerns.

# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

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## Describe reasons for good doctor-patient communication

**W**hat is the purpose of doctor-patient communication and what should be accomplished during the visit? Your doctor should address your health problem and help with decision making—it's the main reason for doctor-patient communication. By learning more about the purpose of good doctor-patient communication, including your role as a patient, we can begin to learn the best strategies to improve communication.

### What is the doctor's role and what are your expectations?

**Expectation 1:** Information exchange between participants

- Doctor offers medical information to patient and asks questions
- Patient asks questions and provides information about personal health issues

**Expectation 2:** Communicating information about your health

- Patient gives his/her perspective on health; expresses his or her concerns
- Patient asks for an explanation in order to feel satisfied with visit
- Doctor expresses interest in patient's health

**Expectation 3:** Decision-making plans and agreement

- Patient and doctor look for agreement on problem and solutions
- Patient and doctor reach the best possible decisions about care

# How To Talk To Your Doctor

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## Step #3

### Apply 3 tips for improving doctor-patient communication

**B**ecause of our understanding of doctor and patient communication styles, we know that certain communication techniques can help during a medical interaction. Good techniques include the patient-centered approach for doctors and asking questions for the patient. The communication tips listed below are regarded as some of the best.

#### Tip #1: Be prepared for your doctor's visit

##### How can I use this tip?

- Set goals
- Write down problems
- Know your medical history
- Share information with your doctor
- Take notes during the doctor's visit
- Think about what you really want to say
- Focus on one point at a time

##### Examples:

*"Dr. Ashton, I made a list of three main things I need to talk about today."*

*"Dr. Gordon, my breathing has not been good. I have strange wheezing sounds."*

*"Also, the problem has lasted 3 days."*

#### Tip #2: Ask questions/receive information

##### How can I use this tip?

- Seek information and clarification
- How long is the course of treatment?
- Are there any alternatives?
- Think of questions that are specific to your health care needs

##### Examples:

*"Dr. Fernández, will other medications affect the medicine you are prescribing?"*

*"Dr. Troung, I would like to start exercising again. Would you agree with my decision?"*

#### Tip #3: Be assertive/express your health concerns

##### How can I use this tip?

- Express your beliefs, interests, or desires
- State your preferences or disagreement
- Use "I" statements

##### Examples:

*"I've got to tell you—what is frustrating is..."*

*"To be honest, what concerns me..."*

# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

## Apply 3 tips for improving doctor-patient communication

**P**ractice the communication tips using the outline below. On the page below, list two or three barriers to doctor-patient communication, like the ones we discussed earlier. Next select one of the techniques for improving communication that might help you overcome the barrier. See the previous page for ideas on techniques. Finally, write down what you would say to overcome the barrier.

Common barriers	What good techniques might help you overcome the barrier?	What would you say to overcome this barrier.
"The appointment is short, only 15 minutes."		
"The doctor moves too fast and I can't get a word in."		
"The doctor uses a lot of medical jargon about the prescription."		

# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

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## Video examples and practice session

**T**he video features familiar scenes of doctor-patient communication. Using the lessons that you've learned today, how would you describe the doctor-patient visit? Does the patient use the techniques that we discussed? If not, how could the patient improve their communication?

### Video clip 1

Check here	What barriers did the patient face?
	Language or cultural differences, including use of medical jargon
	Limited access to care or perception of low quality
	Power, controlled conversations, or aggressive doctors
	Stereotypes about cultural groups: African Americans, Asians, or Hispanics
	Time limitations or excessive waiting
	Confidentiality
	Provider seems to have lack of concern
	Age, gender, dress and grooming



# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

Check here	Did the doctor . . .
	Introduce himself/herself
	Ask patient to describe the problem
	Know the latest medical advances
	Provide diagnosis about the disease and illness
	Give instructions for treating the condition
	Explain things in a manner he/she could understand
	Take time to answer questions
	Listen to the patient
	Show his/her understanding of the situation
	Express himself or herself
	Respect the patient's confidentiality
	Offer language translation or assistance service
	Return his/her phone calls in a reasonable amount of time
	Display positive feelings toward patient and family
	Encourage the patient to participate

Check here	Did the patient . . .
	Write down any questions or make a list of concerns
	Try to be as specific as possible about his/her symptoms
	Ask questions about anything he/she was uncertain about
	Know his/her medical history
	Inform the doctor about any personal beliefs or practices (cultural or religious, spiritual) that may affect a treatment
	Understand the doctor's recommendations
	Share information about his/her life that may be useful to the doctor
	Request language translation service in advance
	Express his/her concerns
	Offer opinions, preferences, or expectations for care



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## Step

## #4

### **Practice the techniques for good doctor-patient communication**

**T**he patients described in the scenes below face barriers to good doctor-patient communication. Select a scene and imagine that you are the patient. Use the techniques for good doctor-patient communication to 1) identify the barriers, 2) plan and prepare for the visit, and 3) demonstrate what you could say to address the problem. If you like, volunteer to practice your scene with our workshop trainer.

#### **Script 1**

You've had shortness of breath for the past month, but it is hard to get time off from work to go to the doctor. Your HMO is always busy, and you have seen your doctor twice in the past two weeks, but you're not better. You need answers to this problem because you want to get better and the breathing problem is starting to interfere with completing your daily activities.

- What are the barriers to good communication?
- What is your plan of action?
- What good communication techniques are important for this patient to use?

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## **Script 2**

You woke up with unusual pains in your neck and you are worried because of a recent stroke in the family. Your family has had bad experiences in the hospital. Your youngest daughter received improper medication and it made her worse. You are concerned because of your family history with stroke, but also that another error could occur. You want your doctor to understand your concerns and diagnose the causes of your neck pain.

- What are the barriers to good communication?
- What is your plan of action?
- What good communication techniques are important for this patient to use?

## **Script 3**

You haven't felt like yourself lately and you've had a headache all day. You take Tylenol, but the headache doesn't go away. The situation concerns you, but you don't want to make the doctor mad at you for coming in for "just a headache." You decide not to call and the next day, you still have a bad headache. Your spouse says, "If you don't go in something bad might happen." It's your first visit to a new doctor that you do not know.

- What are the barriers to good communication?
- What is your plan of action?
- What good communication techniques are important for this patient to use?

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## Next time, I will be ready!

**T**hink about your next visit to the doctor. How can you improve the communication with your doctor? Can you think of techniques to better prepare for your doctor's visit?

- The purpose of my next visit is \_\_\_\_\_.
- To address potential barriers, I can \_\_\_\_\_.
- To help improve communication with my doctor, I could say...

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# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

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## **Summary: Building Bridges**

- Overcome barriers to communication
- Understand your role as the patient
- Plan and prepare for your doctor's visit
- Remember: Doctors and patients must work together
- Communication patterns are related to health outcomes, patient satisfaction, and ability to recall recommendations

*Your actions make a difference!*



# How to talk with your doctor

Your relationship with your doctor should be a partnership—where you and your doctor work together to make the best possible decisions about your health care.

It is very important that you be able to communicate openly and honestly with your doctor about any health care needs or concerns. At the same time, your doctor should

be able to communicate important health information to you in a clear, understandable way.

A study in the December 22/29, 1999, issue of *JAMA* reports that communications between some physicians and their patients need to be improved so that patients can be completely informed and participate in decisions about their medical care.

## PREPARE FOR AN OFFICE VISIT:

*Preparing for a visit with your doctor will ensure that you take full advantage of the time you have together. Here are some suggested steps you can take before your visit:*

- Write down any questions you want to discuss with your doctor during your visit, or give the list to your doctor so that he or she can go over them with you.
- Write down any symptoms or health concerns you have. Try to be as specific as possible, and include what the symptoms are, when they started, what the symptoms feel like, any lifestyle changes you made when the symptoms started, anything that triggers the symptoms, or anything that relieves the symptoms.
- Be prepared to tell your doctor about all the medications you take, including prescription and nonprescription medications, vitamins, alternative therapies, and other supplements you may take.
- Be completely honest about your lifestyle, including your diet, use of alcohol or other drugs, smoking history, sexual history, and other health care you receive.
- Be sure to inform your doctor about any cultural or religious beliefs that may affect a treatment option.
- Make sure you understand your doctor's recommendations.

## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR DOCTOR:

*Your doctor should:*

- Provide information about your condition and any tests or procedures in a manner so that you easily understand.
- Take the time to answer your questions thoroughly.
- Give you specific instructions for treating your condition and taking any medications that are prescribed.
- Know about the latest advances in medicine and be able to answer your questions about them.
- Encourage you to participate in decisions about your care.

## CONFIDENTIALITY:

All discussions with your doctor are confidential. Your doctor will not share information about your health with anyone else unless you provide permission. So don't be afraid to be completely open and honest about sensitive medical issues. Your disclosures should be met with understanding and possible solutions. If you don't feel comfortable talking openly with your doctor, you may want to consider changing doctors.

## SPECIALISTS:

Specialists are doctors who concentrate on certain body systems, specific age groups, or complex scientific techniques developed to diagnose or treat certain types of disorders. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist if your condition is outside his or her area of expertise. You may want to seek out a specialist yourself if you need a second opinion on a medical diagnosis or treatment plan, or if your doctor recommends elective surgery.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Medical Association AMA Physician Select  
[www.ama-assn.org/aps/amahg.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/aps/amahg.htm)
- American Board of Medical Specialties Public Education Program (verify a doctor's certification status or find a specialty doctor)  
800/776-2378 or  
[www.certifieddoctor.org](http://www.certifieddoctor.org)  
Which Medical Specialist for You (\$1.50 each)  
or [www.abms.org](http://www.abms.org)

## INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at [www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm).

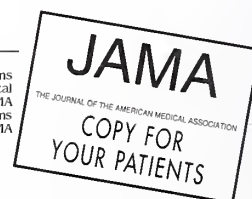
*Additional Sources: American Medical Association ([www.ama-assn.org/insight/gen\\_hlth/doctor/communic.htm](http://www.ama-assn.org/insight/gen_hlth/doctor/communic.htm)), The C. Everett Koop Institute at Dartmouth, American Board of Medical Specialties*

Mi Young Hwang, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

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# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

## About the EXCEED research program

This workshop is made possible through the financial support of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and the Office for Research on Minority Health (ORMH), two agencies that are concerned with quality healthcare and eliminating health disparities. AHRQ's EXCEED (Excellence Centers to Eliminate Ethnic/Racial Disparities) initiative concentrates specifically on the root causes of disparities and interventions to reduce inequities.

AHRQ and ORMH awarded a 5-year grant to Baylor College of Medicine's Section of Health Services Research and the Houston VA Center for Quality of Care & Utilization Studies (HCQCUS) to focus on racial and ethnic variation in medical interactions. The effectiveness of doctor-patient communication skills during medical care interactions can affect health outcomes. Also, evidence suggests that doctors have poorer communication skills with minority patients. The research program is lead by Dr. Carol M. Ashton, Professor of Medicine and Director of HCQCUS.



*Carol M. Ashton, MD, MPH*

"Research indicates that social and societal factors, such as poverty and social class are strong influences on utilization of care. We need to identify the aspects of doctor-patient communication that can be improved, so that patients and families can learn how to become more powerful communicators and obtain better health outcomes."

*—Carol M. Ashton, MD, MPH*

The Baylor-VA researchers are trying to better understand the role race and ethnicity play in medical interactions between doctors and their patients. In addition to the research focus on medical interactions, each project will address a condition of older adults, including coronary artery disease, knee osteoarthritis, lung cancer, breast cancer risk and peripheral arterial disease.

The project leaders include: Paul Haidet, MD, MPH, Assistant Professor and scholar in the Baylor College of Medicine Master Teachers' Fellowship Program; Howard S. Gordon, MD, Assistant Professor and VA Research Career Development Awardee; Tracie C. Collins, MD, MPH, Assistant Professor and Robert Wood Johnson Minority Faculty Development Awardee; Maria Suarez-Almazor, MD, MPH, Associate Professor; Kimberly O'Malley, PhD, Assistant Professor; Herminia Palacio, MD, MPH, Assistant Professor, and Debora Paterniti, PhD, an Assistant Professor at UC-Davis and an investigator at HCQCUS. Richard Street, PhD, Professor and Chair, Department of Speech Communication, Texas A&M University, College Station, will conduct the analysis of doctor-patient communication for the program. Dr. Street has extensive research experience in the area of doctor-patient communication and has published articles in Medical Care, Social Science and Medicine, Cancer, Medical Decision-Making, Family Medicine, and Health Communication. Barbara F. Sharf, PhD, a professor of health communication and medical education at Texas A&M University, has over twenty years of experience training physicians and health providers in the areas of communication skills and concepts, including cultural portrayals of illness and patient's experience. Dr. Sharf will provide expertise in qualitative health research for EXCEED projects. The research program also includes support cores including a Data Analysis Core, lead by Dr. Nelda P. Wray, Chief of the Section of Health Services Research and an Information Dissemination and Educational Academic Liaison (IDEAL) Core.

# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*



*Frank Martin, MS  
Director, IDEAL Core*

## The IDEAL Core

The IDEAL Core conducts outreach with local and national organizations to encourage use of research information on improving the medical interaction through "How to talk to your doctor" workshops. This workshop was designed by the IDEAL Core, a support program for the EXCEED initiative. Frank Martin, MS, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, is the lead designer of the "How to talk to your Doctor" community education forum. He has worked in consumer advocacy and health-disability organizations, providing consumers with information and training. The IDEAL Core is grateful to Baylor-VA faculty and staff for sharing their input on this program: Amy Barrera-Kovach, MSW; Wednesday Foster, MPH; Tracie Collins, MD, MPH; Paul Haidet, MD, MPH; Richard Street, PhD; Barbara Sharf, PhD; Kimberly O'Malley, PhD; Anh Tran, MPH; Alicia Gladney, MS; Carol M. Ashton, MD, MPH; Darrell Zeno, MS; and Emiel Owens, MEd.

"IDEAL Core serves as the liaison between the research program and the lay and academic community. Information exchange and consumer involvement in research can empower communities in need."

—Frank Martin, MS  
Director, IDEAL Core

The IDEAL Core also offers training for minority and non-minority students who are interested in health services research, and conducts cultural proficiency training for EXCEED. The IDEAL Core's community advisory board, the CEO (community education and outreach) network, consists of community members with knowledge and experience relevant to improving minority health, community based outreach, multicultural healthcare issues, health education, or minority academic achievement. Together, they help our program to be the best possible.



CEO members include (l-r):  
**Lynna Littleton, PhD**, Associate Professor of Clinical Nursing at the University of Texas Houston Health Science Center; **Jane Mahoney, DSN**, Assistant Professor at the University of Texas-Houston School of Nursing; **Dr. Margaret A. Goetz**, Director of Medical Bridges and Promotoras de Salud; **Jabari Craft, BS**, a pre-medical student at Texas Southern; **Amye EB Webster, MEd**, a Health Education Specialist at UTMB HealthCare Systems and board

member of the Asian American Health Coalition **Charlene Hunter James, MPH**, Director of the Houston/Harris County Area Agency **Kassahun Bisrat, MS**, Executive Director of the Alliance for Multicultural Community Services; **Charlesetta Deason, MEd**, Principal of Michael E. DeBakey High School for Health Professions; on Aging; University. Not pictured: **Dr. Howard R. Epps**, a clinical instructor in Orthopedic Surgery at Baylor College of Medicine and the University of Texas-Houston; **Cassandra Harris, MS**, Chairperson of the Houston Chapter of the National Black Leadership Initiative on Cancer; **Cindy Leong-Wu, MPH**, The University of Texas Houston Health Sciences Center doctoral student majoring in management and policy sciences; **Janet Pinner, RN, MSN**, Geriatric Support Service Outreach Nurse for Seven Acres Senior Services; and **Michael Solar, JD**, Principal Attorney of Solar and Associates, League of United Latin American Citizens community service awardee.



# How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

## For More Information

For more information about the EXCEED initiative or the “How to Talk to your Doctor” program, please contact Darrell Zeno, MS, IDEAL Core Program Coordinator, at 713-794-8601.

## Step

# #5

## Recall Good Doctor-Patient Communication Strategies

Learning doctor-patient communication skills is one thing, but remembering is a different story. How will you remember the important tips and strategies that we learned today? Recalling what you have learned is your key to success.

To help you remember, please remove the card below and carry it with you so you can refer to the tips.

### How To Talk *To Your Doctor*

#### Did you...

- Know your medical history
- Write down any questions or make a list of your concerns
- Ask questions about anything that you are uncertain about
- Express your concerns
- Inform the doctor about any beliefs (cultural or religious, spiritual) that may affect a treatment

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Health Services Research*

## **How To Talk** *To Your Doctor*

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### **Did your doctor...**

- Introduce himself/herself
- Ask you to describe your problem
- Listen to you and take time to answer questions
- Give instructions for treating your condition
- Respect your confidentiality and you
- Show his/her understanding of your situation
- Return your phone calls in a reasonable amount of time
- Explain things in a manner you can understand

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